



Merilee Kern

Merilee Kern MBA is a Forbes Business Council member and a highly-regarded brand analyst, strategist and futurist who reports on industry change makers and innovators across all B2B and B2C sectors. She is founder, executive editor and producer of “The Luxe List” and host of ‘Savvy Ventures’ business TV show and ‘Savvy Living’ lifestyle TV show that airs on CBS, FOX and other top networks. Connect with her at www.TheLuxeList.com and www.SavvyLiving.tv

New Rules of Professional Speaking (Live or Virtual)



Much has changed in the business landscape, including kicking the already booming public speaking sector into the stratosphere as virtual live presentations (via Zoom and other real-time communication platforms) have become an accepted norm.

Here, Merilee asks international award-winning professional speaker, Saana Azzam, the MENA region’s premier public speaking authority revered for her compelling keynotes at conferences and events around the globe, for her tactical advice for those already serving as public speakers and for those who intend to do so.

MK: How do you see the public speaking trade evolving?

SA: Professional speaking has grown substantially over the years into a global industry and, in doing so, has opened doors of career opportunity for those who are experts and influencers in their respective fields.

While opportunities have risen, so too has competition for professional speakers.

The world of professional public speaking has also changed over the past 18 months, much in the same way the world did as businesses evolved in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professional speaking no longer exists in a vacuum where experts take the stage, give a presentation, and are compensated for their time and expertise.

Today, professionals must continually work on their skills, continually examine industry trends, and manage speaking engagements with care to rise above the competition. Prospects in 21st century professional speaking are often live, although excellent opportunities exist in the virtual realm with more to come in the future.



With these changes in the industry come new rules of professional speaking.

MK: What fundamentals should professional speakers always remain mindful of?

SA: Nearly everyone is familiar with the saying, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” While featuring its own unique measure of sarcasm, the adage is accurate. Although changes happen frequently, much remains constant in the midst of that ebb and flow, certainly in the professional speaking industry. There are “rules of public speaking” that will stand the test of time.

Professional speakers still need to hone their style in order to establish authority and guide the audience to focus and relate as they glean the benefits of listening to an expert.

Setting the tone requires the professional speaker to first know their audience and incorporate their own personality into the speech or presentation.

In addition, clothing, sense of humor and movements also help establish tone and style.

As a professional speaker, eye contact remains key. This establishes a connection with audience members and demonstrates investment in them.

The goal remains to make the audience a part of the speech or presentation, drawing them in and encouraging them to engage and participate.

Pacing presentation and pausing to punctuate important points endures as a significant tenet, both in live venues, as well as virtual ones.

One final reminder in this world of change: venue arrival time is critical and it should be done before the appointed time, whether appearing before a live audience or virtually from the living room.

Take time to familiarise yourself with the set-up; ensure the technology being utilised is functioning properly and check audio and visual equipment.

Also take the extra time to get in a minute or two of practice before the presentation begins.

MK: So how about the ‘new rules’ - what should today’s public speaker set aspire toward?

SA: While it may seem as though virtual professional speaking came on the scene quickly after the global pandemic, it has actually been around for quite some time.

What has changed is clients are now actively seeking virtual speakers to motivate and encourage employees and customers with nearly the same frequency as they seek live speakers for conferences, seminars, conventions and more.

Professional speakers are no longer the purveyors of ritualistic prepared remarks. Instead, today’s most influential presenters are those who give off an effective, honest and communicative dialogue.

As presentations become more interactive, audiences expect conversations, not lectures, which means professional speakers can stay ahead of the competition with dynamic, interactive speeches designed to draw your audience in and deliver your message in an accessible and engaging manner.

Formal presentations are out, approachability and authenticity are in.

There is a new rule No. 1: Be yourself and continue to hone your speaking skills.

Refining a skillset does not necessarily mean more practice. Instead, it means better practice.

Repeating what has been done in the past won’t lead to improvement but taking feedback and making positive changes can.

The latest technology also helps. Simply record rehearsals, watch them back and take notes while factoring in any feedback.

“Today’s most powerful speakers are authentic and approachable. Their presentations are less like formal lectures and more like a conversation with friends.”

The changes needed will become clear, allowing practice of a newer, better presentation technique with those adaptations.

Visuals can also enhance a message or detract from it.

Rid presentations of ineffective visuals and add those that truly express the main message or idea.

Always choose high-quality images, even when using stock.

Rather than matching the presentation to the visual aids, develop a narrative and then enrich it with assets that help focus the audience on the intended message.

MK: I know you advocate a more conversational tone when public speaking, as if the speaker engaged in dialogue with friends. Can you elaborate on that?

SA: Whilst some tried-and-tested rules of effective professional speaking remain steadfast, much has changed in this realm, whether live or virtual.

Today’s most powerful speakers are authentic and approachable.





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Today’s most powerful speakers are authentic and approachable. Their presentations are less like formal lectures and more like a conversation with friends.

The best professional speakers find success lies in their ability to make a connection with their audience, while sharing valuable information from a position of both knowledge and confidence.

